

Abstract Video Richard Simmons

From *New Work in Abstract Video Imagery* exhibition organized for the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse. 1977

In 1958 Korean born artist Nam June Paik was working as an experimenter for Radio Cologne. Considered an avant-garde composer, Paik began using television in his work. By the use of magnets, creating tensions on the television picture, he was able to re-create the picture as an abstract form. By the late sixties this experimentation grew and together with Shuya Abe, Paik had developed a unique machine capable of manipulating a variety of images or television pictures at once. Utilizing conventional television production equipment such as special effects generators with the capacity to wipe, mix or fade, Paik was able to introduce more processing controls 'such as line pots and oscillators, changing the voltage and frequency to suit his sense of visual experience.

Other experimenters began to emerge and other television image processing devices as well. Among these early experimenters of the seventies were Stephen Beck, Aldo Tambellini and Ron Hays. Aldo Tambellini remained the most sculptural with his "Black Spiral" in 1968, using the set to display a single, slinky-like warp which effected whatever was coming from one of the commercial stations. A similar sensibility is evident in the "Video Mandala" by Peter Van Riper. Here the imagery has no noticeable visual progression but exists as a static picture. Both draw attention to the set itself but where Tambellini has implanted and modified a single set, Van Riper has used a tape. Tambellini is represented in this exhibition by much later work. "Clone" is a montage of experimentations, processed into this sixty minute piece.

It should be mentioned that Paik, even though responsible for the development did not evolve as a purist, or abstract image artist. His use of the machine has always been minor where the sum of his creative output is concerned. As is evident from the work "Suite 212". Paik's image selection can be more aptly described as collage or montage. Also included on this tape is part four of "Suite 212", a joint project with composer John Cage, which illustrates Paik's involvement with contemporary ideas rather than image processing. Even in the early years, during the magnet experiments Paik was conscious of the idea of creating a way to talk back to the television, a Dada concept.

Mary Lucier's work "Fire Writing" is another tape representing Dada or Fluxus tradition. An audience is disected by swinging a camera through the beam of a ten milliwatt laser. The picture soon takes on an abstract geometry. The method of determining where the beam should slice the picture is random as the camera is moved to 'write' the letters and words spoken by the artist. Both Cage and Lucier have chosen to allow chance rather than visual aesthetics to determine the finished product. Many of the tapes in this exhibition have this in common in various ways. Just like the one shot painting of the abstract expressionists, an electronic image manipulation doesn't lend itself to total predetermination. Much of the work is entered into with some effects 'discovered' along the way. A very good example of this is the Chicago material. Drew Browning, Barbara Sykes, Phil Morton, Tom DeFanti and Dan Sandin produce their material as an orchestration, blending their talents during an evening of 'electronic performance'.

In contrast to this, the work of Lillian Schwatz and Ken Knowlton are totally predetermined by computer program. Here the medium of video becomes a method of display rather than the medium that is being manipulated. The work of Gary Demos, Don McArthur and Judson Rosebush also represent this use of video. Film can usually work equally well in this kind of situation and many computer animated films have been done to date. Film is subject to different conditions, however., and can become badly worn, scratched and spotted. The work here by Judson Rosebush was originally displayed on a television type

screen, following the computer program, and was then transferred to film and back again to video tape. Here the film was a matter of convenience because the computer display did not have the capacity to send its signal through a simple, co-axial cable,, facilitating direct recording on video tape. Jud's piece is included here in two forms; both as shared imagery in part three of "Suite 212" and as a separate and unique piece.

As might be imagined an artist who chooses to work with these tools must have access to elaborate services because of the expense and sheer volume of necessary processing equipment. Consequently much of the work reflects a 'public' rather than private or intimate feeling. The opportunity for an artist to produce this kind of work in his living room is nonexistent. The exception being the work of Skip Sweeney. Skip's work doesn't utilize image processing devices at all but is simply very careful and sensitive camera manipulations in a feedback situation. Audio feedback is what you hear at a concert when a microphone is located too close to the speaker. A squeal develops as the microphone continues to register and re-amplify its own voice by hearing what it is producing. Video feedback is exactly the same, with a camera looking at a monitor which displays the picture of itself. If the camera is stationary and vertical the monitor displays one television picture inside another, ad infinitum. Once the camera is tilted, the image loses its stability and develops various cycles. These cycles can be controlled by the variety of lens, focus, aperture and zoom. Feedback is being used in many of the tapes in this exhibition but has been disguised. The main operating principle of the videosynthesizer is feedback. It is used just as an oscillator, to maintain motion and tempo and to create the effect of multi-layering or 'trailing'.

It is certainly amazing that an artist can approach a set of tools, take four black and white moving pictures at once, assign each an electronic color, fit them together in the same time frame, view and record the product at the same time, and play it back - all in a total time of sixty seconds.

New Work In Abstract Video Imagery is a collection of videotapes produced by artists between 1973 and 1977. Organized by the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, this anthology represents the introduction of computers, lasers and videosynthesizers into the area of television production. Participants in the show come from various backgrounds, from electronic music to visual art to computer engineering. What they all have in common is a unique involvement in experimentation.

With few exceptions most of these works have been produced in media centers and television production labs. Ron Hays, the virtuoso of the Paik/Abe videosynthesizer completed "Prelude" at the New Television Laboratory at WGBH TV In Boston. The Chicago material was produced on the Sandin Image Processor at the Art Institute of Chicago. Much of the work was produced at the Experimental Television Center at Binghamton, N.Y. Media centers in New York State are supported (as was the organization of this exhibition) by the New York State Council on the Arts, with public funds. Other N.Y. State centers represented are the Artist's -TV Lab at Rhinebeck, Synapse Video Center in Syracuse, Media Studies in Buffalo, ZBS Media (audio only), in Albany, WNET TV Artists TV Lab in New York City and the Intermedia Arts Center in Bayville, Long Island. The Schwartz/Knowlton material was produced at Bell Labs In New Jersey.

This exhibition is organized by Richard Simmons, Curator of Media and Educational Programs at the Everson Museum of Art. It is an artist's co-operative exhibit, with all revenue divided equally among the participants.

This format is very important to the artists today who are experimenting with television, as their products have little marketability. An extension of the de-materialization of the art object, abstract video such as included here may never find commercial television a viable exhibition format. Commercial TV with its advertising pressures and limited time doesn't lend itself to the kind of discreet image enjoyment available in a museum setting.